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WHAT'S GOING IN THE HOLES?

WASHINGTON—In recent weeks, a shudder of uneasiness has passed through the tiny community of people who know, and care, about the nuclear-strategic balance between this country and the Soviet Union. The uneasiness has been reflected in veiled hints from Secretary of Defense Laird, Senator Jackson and others. It is important to understand the realities that lie behind the hints.

Until a few months ago, when the Russians were installing one of their huge, 25-megaton SS-9 missiles, they always went about the business in precisely the same way. First they would build two fences, sometimes three, around a 100-acre site. Then they would dig a big, flat hole, about 100 feet across and 25 feet deep. This hole, easily detectable to the all-seeing eyes of the intelligence satellites, was always a signal to the intelligence analysts that another SS-9 was going on.

Inside the first hole, the Russians would then dig another, deeper, hole, about 30 feet across and 120 feet down. They would line the hole with concrete, put a steel liner inside that and then lower the big missile into the liner. In the remaining empty space of the first big hole, they would build a complex of work rooms, generators, fuel pumps and so on, and cover the whole thing with a thick, steel sliding door.

Then they were in business, with an operational weapon about twenty times as powerful as the American Minuteman missile. Between 1965, when they planted their first SS-9, and last autumn, the Russians had gone through this procedure in precisely the same way again and again, installing some 275 SS-9 missiles.

WORK STOPS

Last autumn, digging had started on eighteen more SS-9 sites, and the intelligence analysts assumed that the Russians would soon raise SS-9 deployment to more than 300. Then, in October, work on these eighteen holes stopped, totally and abruptly—the empty holes are still there, easily visible in the satellite photographs.

Perhaps, it was thought, this was good news. Perhaps it was a signal from the Russians that they were serious about limiting strategic weapons through the SALT talks. But then something happened to cause the shudder. The Russians stopped digging a new kind of hole. This new kind of hole is about

the same size as the second, deep hole that houses the SS-9—but it lacks the first, big, shallow hole.

These different holes have been dug at a furious pace—41 of them at last count, suggesting that the schedule calls for at least 70 a year. The holes have been dug among the six existing SS-9 complexes in South Central Russia, and they could be for some new kind of point-defense anti-missile missile. But the experts think the odds are heavy that the holes are, instead, for inter-continental missiles.

TESTS CONDUCTED

At about the same time the Soviets stopped construction on the eighteen SS-9 holes, they conducted a series of 21 tests of their MRV's—multiple re-entry vehicles. The Russian MRV's, controlled by a rather primitive but effective system of pointing rails, are designed to fall in a predetermined fixed pattern on their targets—the primary targets, the experts unanimously believe, being the thousand U.S. Minuteman missiles that constitute our chief nuclear deterrent.

Because the pattern is fixed, the MRV's are relatively vulnerable to our now-building ABM system. But two of the 21 tests appeared to be, not MRV's, but MIRV's—multiple, *independently targeted*, re-entry vehicles. The MIRV's would be far less vulnerable to a missile defense—it was to counter the expanding Soviet ABM system that our Minuteman 3 and Poseidon missiles were equipped with MIRV's.

It is possible that the two seeming MRV's were simply malfunctioning MRV's. Perhaps the Soviets are simply redesigning their SS-9 configuration—the upper hole and its contents are more vulnerable to a near miss than the missile itself, despite the steel door. But if this is the case, certain questions remain unanswered.

Why should the Russians wholly abandon the eighteen SS-9 holes and start digging new and different holes? Why not simply move the contents of the upper hole to another place? And why the extraordinary haste to dig the new holes?

The experts have a working hypothesis to answer these questions—that the new holes are for a newly designed, multi-MIRVed missile, at least as powerful as the SS-9. If the hypothesis is correct, the MIRV's will almost certainly be in multiples of more than three, since the 25-megaton SS-9 warhead

provides a much bigger nuclear pie to slice, as it were, than the 1-megaton Minuteman. The new missile could be ten-MIRVed, or twelve-MIRVed, or more, but the usual guess is that it will be six-MIRVed. A six-MIRVed SS-9-sized missile would provide six nuclear warheads each more powerful—about a megaton and a half—than a single Minuteman warhead.

If a multi-MIRVed, 25-megaton Soviet missile is what is going to be put into those new holes, that means the end of our Minuteman complex as a credible nuclear deterrent, perhaps within three years, or even two. The peculiar nuclear mathematics make that almost totally predictable. If the Russians are as methodical as usual, we shall know what is going into the new holes by next autumn. According to the almost unvarying Soviet schedule, that will be the time for operational testing of the new missile—if that is what it is.

There is another fact to be considered. In March, the Russians successfully completed their third test series of a non-nuclear satellite intercept vehicle. These then are the facts that have caused the shudder—and they are facts, for the intelligence in these matters is now absolutely "hard." No one will know, until or unless the Soviets test a new missile, just what these facts mean. But any reader of detective stories will discern a pattern of clues, all pointing in the same direction.

A SOVIET CAPABILITY?

The Soviets are bargaining at the SALT talks for eliminating ABM protection for the Minuteman deterrent complex. At the same time, they have probably already achieved the capability (which we lack against them) to blind our intelligence satellites. And the experts are betting about 2 to 1 that they are also on the way to achieving the capability to knock out, with very powerful multi-MIRVed missiles, our land-based nuclear deterrent.

In short, the available clues suggest that the Russians are now going all-out to achieve in the near future a really decisive nuclear-strategic superiority. This is no cause for panic—it does not mean that the Russians are plotting to knock out the U.S. in a first strike. Even so, serious people do have a duty to examine the facts seriously, without the usual, hastily fashionable clichés, about cold-war thinking and the military-industrial complex.